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What if Lebanon Goes for the "Israeli Option"?

There is a distinct possibility that the Phalange may decide that they can no longer go with the Gemayel presidency -- perceiving that he is not resolutely defending rock-bottom Phalange/Christian interests. They would then move to eliminate or depose him. Such a sharp (but not unthinkable) move might be precipitated by further bad losses in the Shuf, a Christian massacre at Dayr al-Qamar, threatening moves by the Syrians in the Matn Maronite heartland, or increasing paralysis of will by Gemayel. Reporting indicates that numerous rightist leaders have been flirting with the idea of dispensing with Lebanon's close dependence upon the US in favor of an alliance with Israel. Such a step would create a serious dilemma for the US.

The choices facing the Gemayel government -- and the Christians -- are becoming increasingly stark.

- National reconciliation is far distant.
- The US can help stem, but not significantly reverse the major Syrian gains against the central government of the past weeks.
- The Lebanese Phalangist Forces are hard pressed and increasingly required to think of their own survival -- now more narrowly based in Beirut and the Christian heartland.

We see increasing indications that many Phalangists -- particularly the right wing -- are reconsidering the "Israeli option."

- This line of argument sees little prospect for comprehensive, long-term military and security support from a US which is nervous about casualties and uncertain in its specific commitment to the Christians as an isolated faction.
- The Israelis have bluntly been telling the Lebanese at a variety of levels that only Israel can ensure long-term Christian safety.
- Debate is taking place among the Christians as to the wisdom of having decided to go with the Americans in the first place.
- Israel is letting it be known that it will fully support the security and future of the Christians only if they will sign on to the 17 May Lebanese accords with Israel leading to normalization. Failing that, Israel will watch Gemayel and the Christians twist in the wind until the wisdom of the Israeli option becomes apparent. "Gemayel has Israel's telephone number."
- The Israelis also point out that time is short: Gemayel and the Phalange must make up their minds before Beirut is gone.

There is no question that a renewed Israeli commitment to support the Lebanese government and its Phalange basis would probably be extensive, involving air and ground support, training, ammunitions and weapons, etc. It

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would be, in effect, a resuscitation of the Sharon plan -- but this time it will be done right. The US would be seen as no longer having a right to counsel Gemayel and his government on how to deal with the Israelis. But it would relieve the US of a number of hard decisions now.

Such a move by the Phalange is a realistic possibility. It becomes more likely if Sharon should succeed in his move back into the corridors of power, accusing Arens of destroying his gains in Lebanon. What would the US do?

Advantages to the US:

- The immediate security of Beirut and environs become assured.
- The MNF role in Lebanon becomes basically protected by the Israeli commitment.
- Israel assumes major responsibility for repulsing the Syrians and the PLO and would probably "cleanse the Shuf."

Disadvantages to the US:

- The US will be perceived as having been ineffective in its support of the Lebanese government and essentially spurned for the better Israeli deal. The McFarlane mission would be over.
- Israel will assume the dominant voice in the ordering of Lebanese internal affairs. It will dispense with Gemayel himself in short order.
- [REDACTED]
- The US will this time have little voice in the evolution of Israeli-Lebanese relations, having had its chance and "muffed it."
- The Israeli-Syrian struggle will continue, with considerable likelihood of early war between the two.
- US future support to Lebanon will be essentially an adjunct of Israeli policy. The Israelis will have a price for assisting the US in Lebanon -- a more intensive strategic relationship in the area seen increasingly through Israeli, and not US, policy eyes.
- Confessional struggles in Lebanon will continue and will need to be adjudicated. It is unlikely that Israel can successfully impose even a "fair" redistribution of power without disgruntled factions seeking outside support for an armed struggle. Israel will not wish to police Lebanon indefinitely. Lebanon will therefore still remain a cockpit of struggle.
- The US will be seen by the moderate Arabs as having capitulated or losing out to Israel in its mid-East policy. The US becomes less reliable, and moderate states will distance themselves from Israel's

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Lebanon, forming a solid line of opposition to Israeli policy. Such a situation is ripe for Syrian exploitation.

In sum, the short range benefits to the US are considerable but the long range benefits are almost non-existent.

The choice is not necessarily ours to make. US support for the government will play a role in this; but US resolve to indefinitely support the Lebanese government will inevitably dwindle as the government becomes less representative and more confessional with no real prospect of national reconciliation in sight.



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